CHAIRPERSON: Senator Gary Winfield, Representative Steve Stafstrom

SENATORS: Bergstein, Kissel, Bizzaro, Flexer, Haskell, Lesser

REPRESENTATIVES: Blumenthal, Rebimbas, Concepcion, Champagne, Dillon, Dubitsky, Godfrey, Horn, Luxenberg, O'Neil, Porter, Riley

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): We are going to call to order this public hearing. Mr. Pohl, if you'd step forward. Before you are given your few minutes to give your opening statement, I will read you the oath.

CLERK: In the event of an emergency, follow directions, stay in the room. If there's a lockdown, wait for an all-clear.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you. If you might raise your right hand. Do you swear or affirm that the case may be that the information you will provide to this Committee will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God or under penalty of perjury? Okay, you may begin your statement.

MR. POHL: Senator Winfield --

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Make sure your microphone is on. It doesn’t look like it is.
MR. POHL: Thank you. Chairman Winfield, Chairman Stafstrom, Ranking Member Kissel and Ranking Member Rebimbas and the esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Michael Pohl. I currently live in Manchester, Connecticut where I've lived my entire life. With me today is my incredibly selfless partner of 21 years, David Pelletier and my God son, T.J. Aiken.

I'm humbled and grateful to the -- to Governor Lamont for nominating me to the State of Connecticut Board of Pardons & Paroles. Thank you to the entire Committee for the privilege of appearing before you today as you consider a recommendation to the full general assembly on the confirmation of my appointment to this very important position in state government.

Again, it is truly an honor to appear before you today to discuss my background and qualifications for this position. My life might not have turned out the way it has if it wasn't for people who understood how to help me even when I wasn't sure if I wanted to be helped or was worth the help. I didn't know how to live without alcohol or drugs as I do today.

On March 5, 2019, I celebrated 35 continuous years of sobriety. Alcohol and drugs had almost taken my life by the time I was 21 years old. I've never been convicted of a crime. But I've spent the last 35 years working with people whose alcoholism and addiction often brought them to the place where they violated the law, were charged with a violation and often served time in prison for their offenses. I know first hand the winding road to recovery and how much work and support it takes to overcome and to learn how to live with addiction.
Many of the people I've helped began to strive for a degree of contentment with themselves in a new but scary life of sobriety. As a result, many have become positive and productive members of the community. We all know how many offenders have substance abuse struggles and mental health issues.

I've witnessed countless examples where offenders shared that alcohol and drugs played a role in their behavior and actions resulting in them being arrested and incarcerated.

For the last 35 years, I've treated every day as an opportunity to give to those who have found a better way to conduct their lives. I try to do this by seeing the potential in each person still suffering from this disease.

I sit before you, a person with personal knowledge of how to change your life by becoming willing, working hard and giving back to others. By being the person who listens for the sincere request for help or how that help can change one's life. I'm grateful to have done a great deal of one to one work with men and women who are in early recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction.

In the last few years, I focused my efforts specifically helping people whose suffering from insidious opioid addition. Many of the people I encounter have mental health challenges in addition to their addiction issues. I can tell you from experience, once they are able to work a recovery program, many have a greater understanding of ways to seek mental health treatment so they are able to live with that as well.

In 1986, Governor William O'Neill appointed me to the Connecticut Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission,
CADAC. Because I was a young person with real life experience and the prevention and treatment of alcoholism and addiction. While I was the CADAC Commissioner, I visited Connecticut's prisons on a regular basis as well as many community based programs.

If I'm given the honor to serve on the State of Connecticut Board of Pardons & Paroles, I will work every day to make sure that people with mental health and addiction get the help they need so they may -- they're successful in seeking a second chance. It is very encouraging to witness when an individual realizes that there's a better way to achieve the goals they held before their life of chaos led them to incarceration.

For the past 10 years, I've had the good fortune to serve as executive director of Pathfinders Association. Pathfinders is a sober community center that provides meeting space for 12 step recovery groups, all recovery meetings and various other recovery based programs.

Over the past 10 years, I have also taught 8th grade United States History at Arthur H. Illing Middle School in Manchester where I have learned that every case is different and there are so many paths to take that will lead to positive outcomes.

I want to assure the Committee that I understand as a Board of Pardons & Paroles member that it is vitally important to consider not only the offender but the feelings and opinions of the victims of offenses and the safety of the people of Connecticut when making decisions. I promise to be analytical and thorough in my review of petitions that come before me. I believe that I have the experience and
knowledge to make well-reasoned decisions regardless of the outcome.

Finally, I want to thank every member of this esteemed Judiciary Committee for allowing me to share my experiences with you today. I respectfully request that you kindly vote in favor of my nomination today. I commit to you that I will give everything I can every day in service to the citizens of Connecticut. Again, I thank you.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you. Are there questions? Go ahead, Senator Kissel.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): Thank you very much, Chairman Winfield. Mr. Pohl, it's great to see you. It was nice meeting you for the first time last week outside of session. And that's an incredible background story. Are you really prepared to give up all that other good work that you're doing right now and focus your life's attention to the Board of Pardons & Paroles?

MR. POHL: I am, sir. If I can, thank you for the question. As -- as a member of a 12 step recovery background, I do a lot of reflection. And looking at my background and experiences has brought me today right here to be considered for this position. And I will do whatever it is that I have to to make myself successful in this position.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): And I see David McCluskey right over there and he and I were at Osborn Correctional in Somers just yesterday for a meeting but also a tour of the facility. And to be honest, seeing some of the inmates that had some mental health was all quite sobering and the facility was run extraordinarily well.
But there's certainly folks that have issues in Department of Corrections facilities. I'm not saying the CO's or the wardens or deputy wardens, I'm saying the inmates. And they may be as successful as you are. So, out of your skill set, what can you bring to the Board of Pardons & Paroles that maybe is not there at this time?

MR. POHL: Thank you for the question again, Senator Kissel. What I would bring is the ability to understand when somebody is providing information and background to be considered for parole. It's -- it's -- it's information that I can consider and with one to one face to face as each board -- Parole Board hearing is. You can very much tell the sincerity and the background if somebody is ready.

But you can also tell for me, if there are stipulations out there that can be put on that parole that will give a person the direction that they need to go so that they don't have to reenter the system.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): And as far as -- one last question and then a comment. My last question is, I think a lot of what the Board of Pardons & Paroles does is a risk assessment. And I know that they have various tools at their disposal, they have access to databases.

But as opposed to one on one and knowing if someone is sincere, someone could be sincere at that particular moment in time and absolutely want to put their heart and soul into turning the lives around. But upon release into the community at large with its various temptations and folks that may have not been good influences, do you have any experience in risk assessment that would allow you to jump in regarding that aspect of your job duties?
MR. POHL: Thank you, Senator, through the Chair. I very much understand the process. And the professional staff that's available to the Board in risk assessment that you -- that's done, that's presented to us on every case, is something that should be given priority and understanding, absolutely.

It's also, in looking at a file and the file, no matter how -- how big that file is, understanding each offender's background and what they've done since that offense. What they've done since their incarceration to improve -- to improve themselves. To -- to take and deal with mental health and addiction and addiction background that they -- that they need to in order to be successful once they reenter the community.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): Well, I have no problem supporting your nomination 100 percent. I think it's great that we are diversifying the background of the folks serving on the Board of Pardons & Paroles. Chairman Giles has done a fabulous job and your hearing was too fast, sir, for me to be here on time. But I did happily support you.

You're going to be working with a great group of people. We've made tremendous strides. After we reassessed everything in light of the horrific murders in Cheshire regarding the Board of Pardons & Paroles, I think we continue to move along that path.

And I think that your background as far as working with individuals in recovery, trying to recover from both alcohol and drug abuse, fits in with the notion that we have of redemption in our State. I know that some people differ and mock the term second
chance but folks want people to have a second chance if they're sincere about it.

And, you know, as someone that has six correctional facilities in my district, I'd rather have law abiding, tax paying citizens than folks that are on the treadmill of recidivism. And with the accurate utilization of the resource of the Board of Pardons & Paroles, you will be able to assist a great team in making those -- those selections for folks that are ready to become productive participants of our society. So, congratulations and I wish you the best. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you, Senator Kissel. Representative O'Neill.

REP. ONEILL (69TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, welcome. In looking at your work history, it goes from present time you're listing as a teacher, a history teacher, from '08 till now. And then you have a claims adjustor from 2000 to '08. There are other things that appear to be volunteer type positions. But based on your age, there seems to be a substantial period that's not accounted for in terms of a work history. I was wondering if you could fill some of that in for us.

MR. POHL: Certainly, Mr. Chairman and Representative O'Neill, certainly. The question on the questionnaire just it -- it asked for 10 years' worth of experience. And the reason why I had just put down the teaching at Illing Middle School for the last 10 years and 10 years prior to that, insurance claims adjustor.

Prior to that, I had -- I had worked at J.C. Penny in the warehouse in Manchester. You know, gone to Manchester Community College, Central Connecticut
State University. Gone through and did a lot of things there.

So, that's a piece that was also missing. I just didn't add that because it was -- they had asked for 10 years and I wanted to just go back that far.

REP. ONEILL (69TH): All Right. So, before the insurance adjuster thing, you had worked for J.C. Penny?

MR. POHL: Right.

REP. ONEILL (69TH): Okay. And when you say Alcohol Drug Abuse Commission Commissioner, was that a member of a board or were you actually the commissioner like Commissioner of Corrections or something?

MR. POHL: So, Representative O'Neill, CADAC, the Connecticut Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, was the predecessor to DEMUS. And what -- what that did was every -- every State Department Commissioner that had a -- some kind of alcohol treatment or prevention program as part of it whether it be the Department of Mental Health, Department of Motor Vehicle, Department of Correction, the director of adult probation for Connecticut.

And then, 10 people that were appointed by the Governor the statute required us to either be -- have a background in the prevention and treatment of alcoholism or drug addiction. And that's -- that was the position that I filled. I was not a single State Agency Commissioner but they referred to us as CADAC commissioners.

REP. ONEILL (69TH): Okay so it would be comparable to somebody who is on the, I'm trying to think, Commission on Women and Children and so forth here.
You're a Commissioner but you're not actually being paid a salary as an executive who directs the operations.

MR. POHL: Yes, sir.

REP. O'NEILL (69TH): Okay, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you, Representative O'Neill. Questions from others? Senator Lesser. Representative, I just went blank because I was looking at Lesser. Luxenberg, thank you.

REP. LUXENBERG (12TH): Happy to be confused with Senator Lesser. Thank you, thank you, Mr. Chair. I just wanted to thank Michael Pohl for coming before us today for this hearing. And I think I'll get a chance to speak later when we -- when we take the vote. But I did have one friendly question for my -- my constituent and -- and friend here who is before us.

Mr. Pohl, in your many, many years of volunteering your time day and night, weekends, sometimes late at night helping a variety of folks in Manchester and throughout the State of Connecticut that have been struggling with and dealing with the challenges of addiction. If you had to estimate, how many people would you say you have -- you have worked with over those years?

MR. POHL: So, Representative Luxenberg, certainly I come from a program that really teaches humility. And it's not -- it's helping the next person but there have been hundreds. Just the other night, you know, somebody who I've known of that's had a problem, you know, a chance meeting in a diner. That young gentleman is working on his second day of sobriety.
Certainly, in my life today, are such a group of people who are recovering from heroine addiction who have their lives back who are clean and sober anywhere from two days to, you know, to years. But a group of -- a group of people that -- that -- that are making it. Not everybody does, you know, not everybody does. But if there's anything that I can do to -- to help somebody get out of the hell that I once knew, that's -- that's what I do.

REP. LUXENBERG (12TH): Well, thank you for that answer. And thank you for a lifetime's work of helping hundreds and hundreds of people who are struggling with and battling with addiction. And working so hard diligently to help many of those people break through the challenges they face and become outstanding citizens and members of the public. And family members to their families as you have done yourself here. So, we appreciate you being here and with that, no further questions, Mr. Chair.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you, Representative Luxenberg. Questions from others? Representative Blumenthal.

REP. BLUMENTHAL (147TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Pohl, for being here with us today. I just have no questions, I just want to make a brief comment. Which is, I think I echo what some of the other folks who said thank you for serving the public in the way you do and thank you for sharing your story with us here today. It's an important story, it's a story that gives you a unique perspective that very important, I think, to have on the Board. And I hope you'll be able to bring it to the fullest extent that is appropriate in your services on the Board. Thank you very much.
MR. POHL: Thank you.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you Representative Blumenthal. Representative Porter.

REP. PORTER (94TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good to see you here this afternoon. We did have a really robust and great conversation earlier or last week. And I just want to commend you for the work you do and kind of just piggyback off of what's already been said.

Since 1984, you've been doing this work, the year I graduated high school. You've been doing this a long, long time. And I have family members that suffer from addiction some have recovered, some have not.

I know the importance of this work. I know the intestinal fortitude and the heart that it is to get this work done. The patience, the empathy, all the things that go into being successful as you have been. And your endeavors to help people in their, what I would call, darkest season.

And I guess I would just want you to speak a little bit about, because you stated, it's been mostly heroine addicts. And because of what we're dealing with currently, could you just kind of speak to what it looks like as you help someone out of that addiction to recover and actually become successful and be able to be a productive citizen.

And the last thing I'll just say is that I'm excited that you are going to be sitting on the Board. Because your experience, because experience is the key, right? We can learn things in books and we can talk to people and have them tell us about their
experience. But to have the experience yourself is, I think, golden.

And I think that it will serve the Board in a way that it hasn't been served yet, not to say that the Board isn't doing a great job. I think that you will be a great addition to what's already been put in place. So, I'm excited not just for the state as a whole but actually for people that will be coming before you. Because you will give them and grant them an opportunity that I think is very special indeed, so thank you.

MR. POHL: Thank you.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you, Representative Porter. Comments or questions from other members of the Committee. Representative Rebimbas. Oh sorry, I missed the question.

REP. PORTER (94TH): Did you miss the question because there was a question. I'll go back to you to speak to -- you got it, right?

MR. POHL: Speak to, I'm sorry Representative. It was speak to how to help somebody out of --

REP. PORTER (94TH): What does that look like.

MR. POHL: What does that look like.

REP. PORTER (94TH): Yes, thank you.

MR. POHL: Thank you, thank you for the question. So, so when somebody is in the grips of addiction, somebody is in the grips of alcoholism, they're in a battle for their life and that can go either way.

I'll tell you, addiction -- addiction puts us in a place where we think things about ourselves that
nobody should ever think about themselves. We -- we think of ourselves in ways that nobody should ever think of themselves.

We are cast alone, you know. Our disease wants us to be alone because if we're alone, we're caught in that cycle that it's just about getting and using and finding any means to continue to get and use, right?

And it's that time, it's that one spot in time where somebody is open enough to hear, to feel what it is that somebody else who's been through it before has got to say. In -- in -- in my case, just yesterday, speaking with a young gentleman, just yesterday, I talked about that. And I talked about how there is hope and how -- and how it takes time and how it's about today and it's about working one day no matter which avenue.

Because it's not just -- although I'm a product of a 12 step recovery fellowship, there are so many different ways to come at recovery. It's about finding what works for the person and helping them find what works for them. That's why stipulations here would be important.

You know, if somebody can be steered towards something that is going to help them find a place in society where they're okay because some people can't go back to where they came from. You know, to go back to where they came from is to -- is to -- is to start that cycle all over again.

So, it's finding that faith, you know, and building that relationship and those connections. You know, it's pulling people in to a group of people who are trying to do a positive thing with their life and
who live, like I do, every day with alcoholism and addiction.

You know, I'm just as eligible as the next person, you know. I know that today I cannot consume alcohol or drugs and expect to have any kind of assemblance of a life, you know. And -- and that's really what it's about. But it's understanding where they are and helping them move forward.

I -- I kind of say just to wrap it up really quickly, I say that, you know, what I learned in working in recovery is the same thing as to why I became such a successful 8th grade teacher. Because we know that 8th grade is one of the toughest years in life, right?

So, what I learned was no matter where somebody is you meet them where they are and you bring them forward. Just like in a classroom of 8th grade children that have, you know, everything going on with them. You meet them where they are and you try to bring them forward. And that's how the connection works and that's how we move people, we move people forward.

And you see success, you see people in recovery who get married, who have children, who get decent careers and jobs and things. I have them all over my life and it's such a blessing because I get to wake up to that every single day. You know, I walk around in groups of miracles because honestly, I shouldn't be here right now, you know, and I am.

REP. PORTER (94TH): Thank you so much. Thank you so much for that, I really appreciate that response. Thank you, Mr. Chair.
SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you, Representative Porter. Sorry to have missed your question. Representative Rebimbas.

REP. REBIMBAS (70TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd just like to take the opportunity to once again congratulate you on your nomination. A quick question before I make some comments. Have you yourself ever had an experience before the Board of Pardons & Parole or know anyone who has?

MR. POHL: I -- I know -- I know some people who have been on parole. I haven't really seen the experience, the exchange between them and the Board in granting that parole. I know some people who have gone for pardons. And, I guess, you know, I need some more training in that area. But, you know, understanding what would lead one to a pardon and -- and not.

You know, so as Chairman Giles has pointed out, there's a training piece that goes with understanding, you know, what goes into granting a pardon and -- and what should happen. But certainly, you know, to have direct knowledge, to have direct experience with someone navigating the Pardon & Paroles system, I have not had that.

REP. REBIMBAS (70TH): Thank you for your response in that regard. And I must say, I want to take also the opportunity to thank you for taking the time to actually introduce yourself to me previously. I believe it was last week and we had a very good dialogue, I felt, as well.

And I think similarly, your dialogue here today, I just find it to be inspiring. I can't imagine an individual whether they're struggling with this disease or not, not being inspired not only by your
story but then what you've taken the opportunity to change that around and give back to the community.

And I want to thank you for actually taking this opportunity, your experiences, knowledge, and natural gifts, I think now and really taking that and taking the opportunity to bring it onto that Board. And I think that again is going to be touching many people in addition to but in a new way.

And as you had indicated, if there's anything that you can provide as inspiration to them that now this Board is going to provide them with the hope for the future, that is just, you know, invaluable. So, just thank you for again taking this next step in your life.

And, you know, obviously then making our state a better state as people have previously mentioned, making productive citizens then of individuals moving forward in their lives. So, again thank you, congratulations and certainly look forward to seeing you confirmed and the great work that you'll be doing on the Board. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. POHL: Thank you.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you, Representative Rebimbas. Are there questions or comments? Representative Godfrey.

REP. GODFREY (110TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First, a disclosure. I've known Michael for a long time and have been very appreciative of what he has gone through to get where he is today. So, I'm delighted that you have been nominated.

I'm very happy to support your nomination because I think you're bringing to a critically important
Agency of the State of Connecticut, life experience, understanding as you already said, the consequences of addictive behavior, of wrestling on a day to day basis with all of those. And I think that brings a really interesting and really helpful point of view to the Board of Pardons & Parole. So, congratulations and I'm looking forward to moving this though, Michael. Nice to see you.

MR. POHL: Thank you.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): Thank you, Representative Godfrey. Comments, questions from others? Seeing none, I just want to thank you for joining us today. And no need to rehash what others have said. I just would associate myself and I believe my chair would, with the very positive comments that you have heard today. So, thank you again for joining us.

MR. POHL: Thank you.

SENATOR WINFIELD (10TH): We have no one signed up to testify but I'm obligated to ask the question. Is there anyone present who has not signed up who might like to testify at the public hearing? Going once, twice, okay. So, we are going to close the public hearing and convene the Committee meeting.